



Michael Jackson Infinity

The Globalization of the King of Pop

BY HUA HSU | JUNE 26, 2009



Photo Gallery: Fans around the world mourn the King of Pop.

And for a morning, at least, MTV went back to showing music videos.

Infinity is a difficult concept to wrap one's head around, but the swell of responses to Michael Jackson's death -- by the hour, minute, Tweet, etc. -- *almost* illustrates it. The tributes will not end anytime soon. It has been classy and respectful; it has been nasty and excessive; it has reminded us of our common humanity; it transports us back to first loves and first encounters with racial hierarchy; it's time to return to the real news of the day -- turmoil in Iran, carnage in Afghanistan, gridlock in Washington -- *but only after this block of classic Michael.*

For Americans, Michael's death has become a referendum on how culture *used to be*, on a time when you either watched it live or heard about it thirdhand the next morning. Older generations came home from wars, buried Kennedy and King, heard the Sex Pistols for the first time, lived through 1968 and 1979. We gasped when Michael got torched during that Pepsi commercial. We carefully studied the moonwalk. The Internet is flooded with stories of 30-somethings who watched "Black or White" after *The Simpsons* nearly 20 years ago.

But Americans also gave up on Michael many versions ago, jettisoning him sometime in the 1990s. The absorption of Nirvana and Dr. Dre into American pop instilled a chauvinism against anything that seemed overproduced or choreographed. As Michael's own scandals ensnared him, he began to seem like a castoff, a former icon best remembered as part of the past. This is when he became the property of the rest of the world, where the winds of fashion weren't quite so finicky, where he was everywhere yet nowhere, a ubiquitous cipher. "You are not alone," he told everyone, at the same time.

The reason Michael mattered -- continues to matter -- is because he was one of the first truly international stars. Not just transatlantic, not just *big in Japan*: He was global. The obvious effect was economic. Michael opened markets around the world; he made the world safe for MTV (after first making MTV safe for nonwhite performers, it should be said). He sold records and sold-out tours everywhere. He was, by most accounts, a gracious guest and a kind ambassador.

Most importantly, in this moment before communication was instant and cheap, Michael was one of the most powerful access points to American culture from abroad -- his star didn't tarnish at the same rate elsewhere. Perhaps it was the wonder and magic of his music or the subversive hue of his skin that exempted him from accusations of cultural imperialism.

Michael belonged to the world -- in part (as illustrated in this *Three Kings* scene that I've written about elsewhere) because America gave him up. Perhaps it was a vision of American possibility. Perhaps it was that he represented no discernible politics (unless we were to take the Black Panther imagery of "Black or White" literally) other than a deep, abiding, and occasionally *intense* commitment to the children. It was probably the music.

In a recent piece in *Foreign Policy* on the future of "globalization," Editor in Chief Moisés Naim pointed out that globalization is much more than just an economic condition. The current crisis will not dull our pursuit for information and style. Globalization is also a celebration of the unpredictable porosity of borders, the shock flow of information across lands far and wide. It is Michael Jackson selling records -- but it is also a stall in Malaysia selling bootlegged Michael Jackson tapes and T-shirts (which, I might add, were way cooler than the American T-shirt designs). It is a flea market in South Africa where they sell framed illustrations of Michael Jackson and Jesus. It is a generation, scattered across continents, that remembers a world tour. It is "#michaeljackson" neck and neck with "#IranElection" on Twitter.

But what of it? It depends on the effect of one's imagination. One example: This Saturday the inmates of the famed Cebu detention center in the Philippines will reprise their "Thriller" routine -- a YouTube smash hit when it debuted a couple of years back. Masterminded by Byron Garcia, the facility's security-consultant-slash-choreographer, the Cebu performances feature 1,400 inmates dancing in unison to big pop numbers such as "Thriller" or Soulja Boy's "Crank Dat." It is astounding to watch and weirdly inspirational. A related story tells the heartbreak of Crisanto Niere, the inmate who played the role of Michael in "Thriller." He looks nothing like Michael -- *nothing*. Yet a prison official says that he is heartbroken. "We forget our problems here [in jail] and with our families," Niere explained in 2007.

For some, Michael was splendor, pride, and questions of dignity; for Niere, maybe he was a moment of escape; and for Garcia, the nuttiest of wardens, Michael represented the possibility of mass, synchronized dancing in the name of spiritual rehabilitation. Which makes about as much sense as wearing a single glove. It's the same everywhere: simple melodies inspiring people to act a fool. As technology enhances our ability to be both always connected and always atomized, these moments of simultaneous pause or grief will only grow less frequent.

We are suspicious of global heroes or feats of ubiquity; we are more cynical about star worship and pop charisma. But for now, a moment of connection. Last night, impersonators massed in Mexico City. In London, plans for a mob moonwalk this evening. In my neighborhood in New York, Michael wafts out of every car, from every window. In Taiwan, an inordinate number of kids are named "Michael" or "Jackson." Packets of information, traveling the globe, all expressing the same grief.

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